SERMON TAKE-HOME NOTES — March 1, 2026

American author Ursula K. Le Guin, known for her brilliant science fiction novels, wrote a short story in 1973 called *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. The story takes place in a fictional, utopian city of "happiness" called Omelas. We aren't told where it is, or even what time period we're in. All we know is that all of its citizens have found a way to structure their society to maximize the happiness of all.

All except one, that is. Midway through describing one of the citizens' summer festivals, the narrator reveals a dark secret: the entire functioning of the city, and all of its happiness, depends on the expulsion, entrapment, isolation, and perpetual misery of a single child kept prisoner underneath the city.

When the citizens of Omelas are old enough to learn the truth about their city, they're shocked and disgusted. In time, though, most come to accept this injustice for the sake of the city's happiness.

And yet a few citizens walk away. The story ends with the narrator describing the destination toward which these few people walk: "The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. It is possible it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas."

The whole town knew about the child under the city, but only a few left. The rest accepted the compromise. Most people do. Through the history of our nationalistic civilizations, most people don't walk away. They stick around for any happiness they can get.

Or they are stuck as part of the scapegoat class of people. The marginalized. The ones on whose perpetual misery the so-called civilization stands. Le Guin's short story is masterful in terms of symbolizing the scapegoat class of people in terms of one child. *In theory* it only takes one child's misery to ground the happiness of a civilization. *In practice*, it takes many more.

The question for us today is, How many does it takes to walk away in order to stop the scapegoating structure of nationalistic civilizations?

That's the question in the balance in today's Gospel Reading. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a ruler of the Judeans. He is a person of power and privilege, a person who accepts the scapegoating structure of the Roman Empire because he does enjoy some benefits from it, even if he's no where near the top of the pyramid. Afraid, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at midnight to try to find answers to his questions.

It doesn't start out well. The first thing that Jesus talks about is being born from above, or born again, if one desires to enter God's reign. We must be born again, born from above, by God's spirit in order to see the way of the world and walk away from it. The Son of Man will let himself be the One lifted up as the scapegoat, the lamb of God, for all the world to see. It will be like the bronze serpent lifted on a pole in the Sinai wilderness for their ancestors to look upon and be saved.

At this point in the story, Nicodemus, as a person of privilege, has too much to give up to choose walking away. But we will see Nicodemus two more times in the Gospel. In chapter 7, Jesus is verbally sparring with a group of Pharisees in Jerusalem, and Nicodemus speaks up on Jesus' behalf (John 7:50). At the end of the Gospel, Nicodemus appears again as one who helps Joseph of Arimathea place Jesus' body in the tomb (John 19:39). Perhaps the crucial moment is unmentioned. As a ruler of the Judeans, was Nicodemus present at the council meeting when Caiaphas the High Priest said the scapegoat thing out loud? As they plot Jesus' lifting up on the cross, Caiaphas says to the rest of his fellow Judean rulers, "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed (John 11:50)." Was Nicodemus there to hear the scapegoat principle said out loud? Then, when he saw Jesus lifted up on the cross, did it finally make sense to him? Was his helping Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus a sign that he might be willing to finally follow Jesus in walking away to God's reign of love?

These are the questions, of course, that are still graciously posed to us. Centuries ago, the Church made a decision to ally itself with empires based on the scapegoating system, explicitly counter to what Jesus is asking us to walk away from. Now, here's the choice once again: God loves this world so much that God sent the Son of Man, a next generation of being human, to be lifted up on the cross as the scapegoat, as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Will we be among those who stay and benefit from the scapegoating of the most vulnerable? Or will we be among those walk away into the reign of the One who sent the Son in such unimaginable and unconditional love?